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Essay on RIDICULE, WIT *and* HUMOUR.

By WILLIAM PRESTON, *Esq*; M.R.I.A.

PART THE FIRST.

RIDICULE is that branch of the *fine* or *mimetic* arts which professes to excite the emotion of *mirth*. It is seen more striking and forcible in poetry and painting, where the imitations of nature are more general, as well as more apt and pointed; but even music is capable of it in a certain degree, as for example, by a burlesque or sort of parody on some grave composition, by an imitation of odd and unseemly noises, or by strains expressive of whimsical and grotesque emotions and situations. *Ridicule* excites *mirth* by the RIDICULOUS; that is to say, by an exhibition of defects and blemishes of the lighter kind, which neither imply a sense of pain and misery in the object or substratum to which they belong, nor contain any thing noxious or alarming to external

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nal beings. Should the blemish or defect be in any vital attribute or quality, either essential to the health and well-being of the subject, or requisite to the due performance of its duty and functions for the common good, mirth will not be the consequence; the gay contempt will be checked either by a sense of the pain or inconvenience which the defect or blemish in question must cause to the subject before us, or the alarming consequences which may redound from it to society; and our feelings, instead of mirth, will be something far different; sorrow and pity in the one case; terror, disgust, indignation or hatred in the other.

THE foregoing definitions of RIDICULE and the RIDICULOUS take in mental as well as corporeal objects, and are literally borrowed from the great philosophical critic of Greece—"Το γὰρ γελοῖον (says *Aristotle*) ἐστὶν Ἀμαρτήματα τι καὶ αἰσχρὸν ἀνωδυνον καὶ ἔφθαρτικόν οἷον εὐθύς το γελοῖον πρόσωπον αἰσχρὸν τι καὶ διεστραμμένον ἀνεὺ ὀδύνης." And *ridicule*, according to him, consists in the representing (το φαυλοῖερον ἀλλ' ἔμνηοι καὶ αὖ πᾶσαν κακίαν) the foibles and lighter vices of the mind, and slight corporeal blemishes and defects. These are what Mr. Hobbes distinguishes by the name of infirmities.

THE peculiar emotion excited by ridicule, independent of the pleasure resulting from the truth of the imitation, is called MIRTH; a sensation which has been improperly confounded with *laughter* by some writers who have professed to treat this subject, particularly by Mr. *Hutcheson*, the moral philosopher, and a Dr. *Campbell*, in a book which bears the imposing title of *Philosophy of Rhetoric*. *Laughter* is a mere corporeal involuntary affection,

affection, like crying, coughing or sneezing ; it is defined by some writer that I have seen to be a succession of nascent or imperfect shrieks* ; it sometimes indicates an emotion of the mind, but often proceeds from causes purely mechanical and external, like any other convulsion ; tickling, for instance, or the sight of violent laughter in others, will produce it ; in hysterical patients it is a mere disease, equally so with the *cynic spasm* or the *dance of St. Vitus*.

To define the nature of *mirth*, in other words, to explain the cause of that pleasure which we derive from *ridicule*, we must recur to the theory of Hobbes, which is conformable to the definition of Aristotle, and will on examination appear to be founded in nature. Mirth (says the philosopher of *Malmfbury*) arises from a sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with our own infirmity formerly, or that of others. Here we must observe the force of the expression *sudden conception*, which implies that the whole pleasure of the mirthful sensation does not proceed from conscious triumph, any more than it does from the truth of the representation : Part is to be attributed to the odd and unforeseen situation or conduct of the ridiculous thing or agent ; thus we find, by experience, that our mirth is anticipated and destroyed by any thing which checks or prevents the surprise of this sudden conception ; for example, when the person, who means to be facetious, prefaces his observation or his tale with the promise of a good jest or a laughable story, whereby we are prepared for something ludicrous, and lose the pleasure of the surprise.

* As well as I can recollect, by Dr. *Hayley*, a profound writer on metaphysics, from whom the ingenious Dr. *Priestley* has taken many valuable hints.

As to that part of Hobbes's theory, which makes the triumph arising from comparison a principal efficient cause of the pleasure attending on ridicule, I think we need only recur to our own experience for a confirmation of its truth. Why do not men chuse to be laughed at? certainly because it indicates that they are objects of contempt. How happens it that a sportive word is more severely felt, and excites more lasting resentment, than the keenest reproaches? Why do we hold it indecorous and profligate to laugh at our parents, benefactors and seniors? Why is it held impious and profane to laugh at things divine and holy? Why do public speakers and controversial writers endeavour to turn the laugh against their opponents? Why is ridicule so powerful an engine of debate, even while it disclaims an appeal to sober argument? Surely because the very essence of mirth is a latent contempt, and there is a sort of general intuitive perception that ridicule degrades and vilifies its object. Hence it is, that a person who laughs at his own foibles and defects is thought to show an extraordinary effort of good sense and good humour, inasmuch as, by so doing, he makes a painful sacrifice of selfish feelings. We see too, that many people can jest freely on their own infirmities, who will not bear the least degree of raillery on that head from others; undoubtedly this proceeds from a feeling that ridicule implies contempt. When people laugh at themselves, the self-humiliation is more than counter-balanced by the self-applause; and, instead of sinking, they rise in the opinion of the world, by a frank confession, which at once shows fortitude and good sense, and disarms envy by a confession of weakness. The fact is, that people never do laugh at themselves except from some political motive; either to
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acquire the character of good humour, to ingratiate themselves with those whom it is their interest to please, or to disarm the ridicule of others by anticipation. But still (which is all that is necessary to my argument) whether a man laughs at himself or his neighbour, whether the subject of his ridicule are his own past infirmities or the present infirmities of others, contempt is the basis of his mirth.

To illustrate what has been said by a few examples :—Impotence and decrepitude, considered merely as such, do not excite mirth, but compassion ; yet should we find the impotent cripple boasting of his agility, and attempting to mix in the dance ; or see age and deformity plaistered over with lace, and affecting the gallant ; this attempt at some character or achievement, to which the personage is so notoriously inadequate, impresses us with a strong sense of his inferiority, the emotion of contempt is excited, and mirth is produced, unqualified by compassion for infirmities, of which the sufferer himself seems so little conscious. An odd and grotesque countenance, a whimsical and outree configuration of body, uncommon grimaces and distortions of the features and limbs, provided they are unattended with pain, may excite laughter ; while the convulsions of pain, the deformity of sickness or of sorrow, affect us only with terror and pity. The absurdity and incoherence of a drunken man excite laughter, for they move contempt ; the ravings of a maniac fill us with melancholy and horror. Want and beggary do not of themselves excite mirth ; but should we see a beggar with velvet, or lace, or embroidery mixed among his rags, that incongruous union of finery and wretchedness would provoke our laughter. And these

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instances may serve to show, that they are only the lighter defects or blemishes, unaccompanied by pain or misery on the one hand, or virulence and danger on the other, that are the proper subjects of mirth. And to convince us that contempt, a certain self-triumph of the mind, is a principal source of the pleasure which we derive from mirth, let us recollect that there must, to constitute ridicule, be some competition, as well as inferiority; a resemblance and a contrast in the objects compared. The oyster, or the earth-worm, the poor beetle which we tread upon, are vastly inferior to man; yet that inferiority does not produce contempt, because these creatures never imitate us, and are as perfect in their kind as imperial man in his. Some approximation, some resemblance there must be; so that not every animal is a subject of mirth, but those only which imitate human nature, whether that imitation be near or remote; such are dogs, monkeys, kittens, parrots, magpies, jays, and some others. Song birds and exotic animals may be kept for the purposes of luxury in our cages and menageries, and afford pleasure by the melody of their notes, the beauty of their forms, or their rarity; some animals, instead of pleasure or mirth, produce, by their appearance, only terror, disgust or pity; every one of those creatures, which are capable of exciting mirth, are capable also, in a certain degree, of imitating some action of man. The monkey confessedly resembles the human species at all points; the cat uses her fore paws like hands, and for that purpose nature hath provided her with *clavicles*; the dog and the bear may be taught to walk upright on two legs like man; the jay, the parrot and the magpie have the power of forming articulate sounds. Nor is our mirth excited indiscriminately by those creatures; it

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is in those moments only, when they attempt to imitate human actions, that they become objects of laughter.

It should be enquired why mirth is often excited by the representation of things, which in their actual existence would, perhaps, move compassion, perhaps conciliate approbation and esteem ; such are many of those paintings called conversation pieces ; such are poems like Shenstone's School-mistress, and many scenes in comedies and novels which profess to exhibit pictures of real life ; nor is it difficult to explain this matter. In the first place, though the representation follows nature, it is nature distorted, and her distorted features are more condensed and accumulated together than they commonly exist in real life ; but supposing those features to be exactly copied, without the adding of any thing, still there is a riant and grotesque colouring diffused through the picture, by the skill of the artist ; while, in real life, the rude and vulgar manners, the odd and grotesque incidents, may be combined, with such collateral circumstances, as may excite emotions widely differing from contempt and triumph, and which predominate over them ; for instance, the ideas of rural innocence and honest industry, that arise from seeing the family of a peasant at their labours, will conciliate our esteem, and the appearance of poverty and wretchedness will move our compassion ; besides, the recollection that the picture before us is but a fiction, prevents our having such strong feelings of esteem or compassion as if we contemplate the reality.

To proceed to the infirmities and defects of the mind, they are mild infirmities, and moderated defects only, that are fit subjects of

ridicule. Infirmity and vice, not flagitious guilt, are the proper food of mirth ; Aristotle expresses it *το φαυλον' αλλ' ε' καλα πασαν κακιαν*. The representation of cowardice, affectation, avarice or vanity may be ridiculous ; it may afford a triumph by comparison, unallayed by any feeling or apprehension of serious evil to any body ; but cruelty, ingratitude, perfidy, and the whole black catalogue of gigantic crimes and flagrant passions, that rend asunder the social ties, and heap the measure of human calamity, these, far from exciting laughter, raise in us emotions of abhorrence, indignation or fear. In the occurrences of real life a slight mischance or blunder, even of our best friend, will raise a smile ; but a more signal misfortune or fatal error, even of an enemy, will move our compassion. The fact is, that mirth, though a very prompt and lively emotion, yet not being so very necessary to our existence and the preservation of society as many others, gives no very deep tincture to the mind, but mildly disperses itself, and vanishes before such as are of more general and important use, and of course armed with stronger powers of embracing and possessing the human spirit.